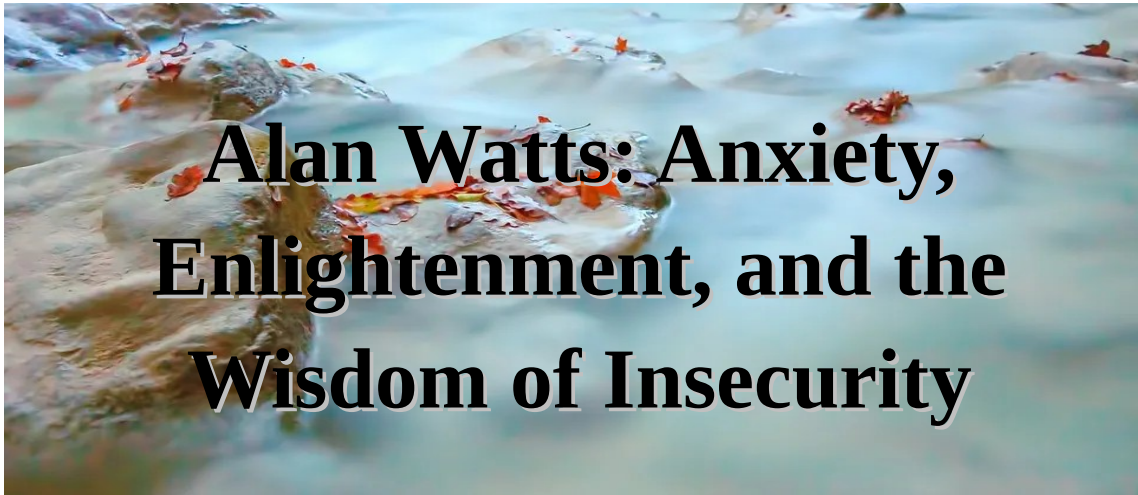




ACADEMY *of* IDEAS

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Alan Watts: Anxiety, Enlightenment, and the Wisdom of Insecurity

Throughout the history of civilization individuals have had access to myths which conveyed the sense that life was meaningful and secure – that human beings have a central place in the universe, an importance in the grand scheme of things.

With the rise of science these myths have been penetrated and dissolved. Fewer and fewer individuals find it possible to believe in them, and thus more and more are left standing alone in the void, facing the abyss – forced to figure out the meaning of life and their place in the universe without any external support:

“There is, then, the feeling that we live in a time of unusual insecurity. In the past hundred years so many long-established traditions have broken down—traditions of family and social life, of government, of the economic order, and of religious belief. As the years go by, there seem to be fewer and fewer rocks to which we can hold, fewer things which we can regard as absolutely right and true, and fixed for all time.

To some this is a welcome release from the restraints of moral, social, and spiritual dogma. To others it is a dangerous and terrifying breach with reason and sanity, tending to plunge human life into hopeless chaos. To most, perhaps, the immediate sense of release has given a brief exhilaration, to be followed by the deepest anxiety. For if all is relative, if life is a torrent without form or goal in whose flood absolutely nothing save change itself can last, it seems to be something in which there is “no future” and thus no hope.” ([The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts](#))

Many have celebrated the destruction of religious and cultural myths, believing that we have now rid ourselves of “childish illusions”, and thus are free to confront reality without blinders. Others

thinkers, such as Watts, have understood that myths serve a vital role in maintaining the psychological and emotional health of individuals.

The Importance of Myths

As human beings we need myths to impart the sense that life is meaningful and worth the effort, that there is some coherent order or plan to it all – that life isn't merely a "tale told by an idiot".

"For man seems to be unable to live without myth, without the belief that the routine and drudgery, the pain and fear of this life have some meaning and goal in the future." [The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts](#)

Myths act as a psychological antidote to the reality of our situation: they mask our cosmic insignificance, make sense of otherwise seemingly senseless suffering and evil, and provide ideals to help us rise above difficult situations and continue prodding onwards. To live without myths is a burden which has been forced upon the modern individual.

With the destruction of traditional myths, many have proposed that modern humans need to adopt new myths – but Watts doesn't think this is possible. A myth is only effective so long as it is believed to be true. When it is seen for what it is, it loses its efficacy.

"Once there is the suspicion that a religion is a myth, its power has gone. It may be necessary for man to have a myth, but he cannot self-consciously prescribe one as he can mix a pill for a headache. A myth can only "work" when it is thought to be truth, and man cannot for long knowingly and intentionally "kid" himself." [The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts](#)

Distraction as a Coping Mechanism

The lack of adequate myths available to the modern individual has played a role in the rise of psychological issues such as depression and anxiety. It can be terrifying to face the mysterious unknown that is the universe without external aids. Unable to make sense of the universe and their place in it, many today flee from the existential angst this causes through distraction.

It's easier to fill one's mind with mindless entertainment, worrying about what the latest celebrity is doing or wearing, than to be left alone to face troubling existential questions such as: Why am I here? Who am I? Speaking of the individual who craves distraction, Watts wrote:

"His eyes flit without rest from television screen, to newspaper, to magazine, keeping him in a sort of orgasm-without-release through a series of teasing glimpses of shiny automobiles, shiny female bodies, and other sensuous surfaces, interspersed with such restorers of sensitivity—shock treatments—as "human interest" shots of criminals, mangled bodies, wrecked airplanes, prize fights, and burning buildings." [The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts](#)

Is Consciousness a "Mistake"?

For those of us who lift our eyes from the television screen and social media feeds, and actually contemplate the meaning of our existence and the universe around us, it may appear tempting to conclude that human beings are the product of an evolutionary "mistake". Perhaps our

consciousness is capable of grasping too much knowledge and insight, and without the soothing balm of illusions and myths, we are too weak to face the unknown:

“It is understandable that we should sometimes ask whether life has not gone too far in this direction, whether “the game is worth the candle,” and whether it might not be better to turn the course of evolution in the only other possible direction—backwards, to the relative peace of the animal, the vegetable, and the mineral.” [The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts](#)

“Letting Go” as Enlightenment

Watts considers this point, but he does not accept it. He proposes another solution to the problem – a total and comprehensive reorientation in our way of living via “letting go”. We can let go of our need to feel secure, of our desire for life to be meaningful and to make sense. We can “let go” of all our beliefs which keep us confined and chained to a certain limiting worldview. We can “let go” of our attachment to life and death. Doing so is not easy and requires a transformation of consciousness and attitude, but in the eyes of Watts the time is perfect for such a transformation.

“The present phase of human thought and history is especially ripe for this “letting go.” Our minds have been prepared for it by this very collapse of the beliefs in which we have sought security. From a point of view strictly, if strangely, in accord with certain religious traditions, this disappearance of the old rocks and absolutes is no calamity, but rather a blessing. It almost compels us to face reality with open minds.” [The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts](#)

“Letting go” is so difficult because we have an innate tendency to grasp onto things. Because we are aware that everything flows and what we have now will at some point in the future be taken from us, we try to turn the things we’re attached to into stone. We hold too tightly to our loved ones and relationships, we do anything we can to retain our youthfulness as we age, and we grasp onto our beliefs as if they foretold the secrets of the universe, and thus remain rigid and closed minded.

This attempt to grasp onto things doomed to fail – for the universe flows on incessantly and indifferently to our wishes. The attempt to grasp on to things, to make the impermanent permanent, therefore goes against the very nature of life itself. Life is always changing and in flux, and any attempt or desire to make it otherwise is futile and foolish:

“Indeed, this is the common attitude of man to so much that he loves. For the greater part of human activity is designed to make permanent those experiences and joys which are only lovable because they are changing. Music is a delight because of its rhythm and flow. Yet the moment you arrest the flow and prolong a note or chord beyond its time, the rhythm is destroyed. Because life is likewise a flowing process, change and death are its necessary parts. To work for their exclusion is to work against life.” [The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts](#)

According to Watts the only option left for those of us in the modern day for whom all myths have lost their potency, and who are uncannily aware of the indifferent coldness of the universe which in due time will destroy everything we love including our life itself, is to accept our situation, jump into the universal river, and go along for the ride:

“The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.”[*The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety, Alan Watts*](#)